

FACT SHEET

Dolphin-Safe Labeling

Background

One of the primary fishing methods used to harvest tuna in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean (ETP) is for fishers to set their nets around certain schools of dolphin to catch tuna that swim below. The International Dolphin Conservation Program Act of 1997 requires the Commerce Department to study the effects of this fishing practice on dolphins and to conduct dolphin population assessment and stress studies. The legislation directs the Commerce Department to adopt the new dolphin-safe label definition unless the Secretary determines that the ETP fishery is having a significant adverse impact on depleted dolphin stocks. In the absence of sufficient information to make such a determination, the Commerce Department is directed to adopt internationally agreed standards.

Scientific Finding

On July 27, 1998, the Secretary of Commerce certified that research had begun to ascertain the effects of the fishing practice of chasing and encircling dolphins. Using this research as a basis, the Commerce Department is required to make initial and final findings on whether chase and encirclement of dolphins during tuna fishing is having a significant adverse impact on any of the three depleted dolphin stocks in the ETP. At the date of the initial finding, there was insufficient evidence to make a scientific finding of significant adverse impact, and therefore, the Commerce Department is required by the Act to change the dolphin-safe labeling standard. When the new labeling standard goes into effect in the Winter of 2000, tuna may be labeled dolphin-safe only if no dolphins were killed or seriously injured during the set in which the tuna were caught.

The Act requires the Commerce Department to make its final scientific finding between July 1, 2001 and December 31, 2002.

Labeling Standard

Before the initial scientific finding, tuna products containing tuna harvested in the ETP could be labeled "dolphin-safe" only if no intentional setting on dolphins occurred during the fishing trip. With the new labeling standard, tuna caught in the ETP by large purse seine vessels may be labeled "dolphin-safe" only if no dolphins were killed or seriously injured during the set in which the tuna were caught. The label will be supported by a tracking and verification program to track tuna from the set in which the tuna is caught to the can in which the tuna is packed.

Impact on Dolphin Stocks

The change in the labeling standard will not affect the number of dolphins that are annually killed. The international agreement on the International Dolphin Conservation Program limits dolphin mortalities associated with tuna fishing to less than 5,000 dolphins per year. Per-stock-per-year dolphin mortality limits will be set to ensure that no individual stock is adversely affected.

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